

The English Leaflet

THE ENGLISH LEAFLET is published at Boston, by the New England Association of Teachers of English. Subscription price, One Dollar. Sec'y-Treas., A. B. DeMille, Winthrop Highlands, Mass. Editor, Charles Swain Thomas, Lawrence Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Vol. XXII ? or NOVEMBER, 1923

Number 198

MODERN POETRY FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

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I

After resisting steadily these many years, my mind has just thrown open its doors and let a stranger in. Not only am I, at present, showing this poetic stranger a hearty sympathy, but I am actually dancing a revolutionary jig with her and shouting *Freedom* at the top of my voice! Yet even while I rejoice with her, there clings to my other hand the long winding chain of her sisters of the past. I cannot free myself of them for they, too, are dear. Can one be both revolutionary and conservative at the same time? I believe so.

As we review the pages of the history of men, we discover that political revolutions are of intrinsic worth only when they retain the good of the past while destroying its evil. The French revolution of 1732, in its exhaustive war upon the whole of the past, might be stimulating and productive of later results, but it could not in itself be final. There had to follow the increasingly liberal revolutions of the nineteenth century in order to bring out of the chaos the present stability of the French Republic.

So must it be with literature. Only so long as a new movement embraces a liberal view of the whole of its history and deliberately chooses the best from the mass, can it hope for permanency.

From this point of view, then, I am rejoicing in the New Poetry movement. When the new poets sing their song of freedom and when I laud their music, I understand their freedom to be the freedom of true American liberty—liberty that means law and restraint and not license. And I believe that the new poets have in mind this sort of freedom in their creed, even though some fail, as we all do, to follow their best light. Here is the sum of their principles as expressed by

the Imagist group, which is probably the most representative at the present time.

1. To use the language of the common speech, but to employ always the *exact* word, not the merely decorative word.

2. To create new rhythms as the expression of new moods. We do not insist upon "free-verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We do believe that the individuality of a poet may be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms.

3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject.

4. To present an Image (hence the name "Imagist"). We believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities.

5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite.

6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is the very essence of poetry.

II

Surely these are not the essence of destructive revolution. They seem, rather, an attempt to sum up the good of the poetic art of the past and to reach rather daringly into the possibilities of the future. Yet, in almost every case, the dare is based upon precedent. Look at the first article—to use the language of the common speech, the *exact* word. Does this quatrain fill the requirement?

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—
The desert and illimitable air—
Lone wandering, but not lost.

Yet William Cullen Bryant wrote it before there were any Imagists.

The second article considers the creation of new rhythms as the expression of new moods. The word "new" arrests our attention, and for a moment we shy at the sign of red. But after all, this is not revolution. Let there be new rhythms as there are new methods in science, in industry, in all progress. The only other requirement we would make is this,—be sure to let there be poetic rhythm. I think we can no more say "Impossible" to these adventurers than we can say it safely to explorers in other fields. All that we can ask is that they stay within the laws of their own medium in seeking the new.

The same thesis sponsors free-verse, without insisting upon it, for individuality of expression. Very well, Arnold essayed

free meter and even unrimed verse in the Victorian Era. The following from "Philomela" would seem to indicate that he was not unsuccessful:

Hark! ah, the nightingale—
The tawny-throated!
Hark, from that moonlit cedar what a burst!
What triumph! hark!—what pain!

What triumph! hark!—what pain! Irregular as it may be, however, there is rhythm.

The imagist next wants absolute freedom in the choice of his subject. Certainly the poet has that right. I want absolute freedom, too, in the choice of what I shall eat. At the same time, common sense prevents me from eating dill pickles before breakfast. May we not hope that our new poets will refrain from the dill-pickle habit too, even though there be no law against it? It hurts the new movement, I believe, to find some would-be poets using their newly-declared freedom on such subjects as this:

I SAW A MAN

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
"It is futile," I said,
"You can never"—
"You lie," he cried.
And ran on.

This particular freak was produced, I shall add for the consolation of the Imagists, by Stephen Crane before their time. Yet herein lies the danger of freedom in choice of subject minus a common sense idea of the stuff of which poetry is made.

In the fourth place, the imagists emphasize the value of the image as poised against the generalization. We wonder if they mean this to the exclusion of the generalization or merely for the greater elucidation of it? The latter plan seems to me the safer ground. Our greatest poems of the past are those full of images. Are there images enough here for the new school?

Oh lift me from the grass!
I die, I faint, I fail!
Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eyelids pale.
My cheek is cold and white, alas!
My heart beats loud and fast;
Oh! press it close to thine again
Where it will break at last.

Yet we would not forego for imagery the same poet's generalities of which this is but one:

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heap'd for the beloved's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself would slumber on.

Is any poet more rich in imagery than Shelley or more subtly able to quicken our pulse with the generalities drawn from this very imagery?

It is very easy to find examples of the fifth point among the poems of the past. Almost any random selection from Browning will give us poetry that is hard and clear, not blurred or indistinct.

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead!
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
That is her book-shelf, this her bed;
She plucked that piece of geranium flower,
Beginning to die too, in the glass.
Little has yet been changed, I think—
The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays thro' the hinges chink.

Finally, not only the Imagists but almost all of us, I think, believe that concentration is the very essence of poetry. Witness Tennyson's Elaine, who "did not seem as dead, but fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled," and Wordsworth's Michael when he lifted not a single stone.

III

Since the new movement, then, seems so essentially *old*, why is it *new*? In the first place it is new for us in the same way that hoop skirts would be new, though in reality they are old. It is new because it is a revival of the best of the past at a time when the old was becoming conventionalized to the point of stagnation. It is new largely because the pendulum has swung back and found us here (found us instead of our ancestors). So the world moves in pendulum sweeps and the momentum usually brings with it new energy and vigor. So it is with the new poetry.

In the second place, the present poetic dictum is new because it is exploring what Professor Lowes in his most enlightening "Convention and Revolt in Poetry" calls the "No-Man's Land of Literature." He means the space which divides prose from poetry. Here as in war, there is adventure and possibility largely flavored with danger. When poetry encroaches too far upon prose, or when it calls itself polyphonic

prose, "free" it may be or "many-voiced" it may be, but it loses the dignity innate in itself. Here lies the danger of liberty sans law. In too free verse, poetry becomes prose; in polyphonic prose it deliberately relinquishes its own birth-right of form. When poetry divests itself of rime, meter, line, and regular rhythm, what is there left to distinguish it from prose? Are there any thoughts capable of expression without all these, that could not be as well expressed in prose as such? Has poetry any longer any *raison d'être* when it has abandoned practically all the stuff of which poetry is made?

After all, these dangers are but those into which the frail ones fall and then they die. They serve merely as warning for those of higher flight, and it is to these that we must turn in our study of the new forms. Yet here, too, lie difficulties. When the bad has not yet become submerged, by what tests shall we know the good? There seem to me to be two, chiefly:

First, let us look for depth. We might call it, serious purpose. The poet's subject may be light, gay, even humorous, but is there, underneath it, a sincerity of purpose? Has he something worth saying, something that should be said? Or is he making of the glorious art of poesy a farce to belittle its grandeur? Let him be free to choose his subject certainly, but let us not find Philistinism or flippancy in it. Let him chisel his poem out of the hard granite of elemental nature and humanity.

Our second requirement is that the poet keep safely within the realm of his own art so that we may be able to distinguish clearly that what he writes is poetry and not prose, just as we expect to know painting from sculpture without straining our eyes, and the violin from the drum without strain to our ears. Let him adventure, if he will, in free meter, free rime, and free rhythm, but let him beware when he relinquishes all, and the greatest of these is rhythm. For out of the rhythm of the rhythmic universe, poetry grew and it can never live outside that rhythm of which it is a part.

In presenting this contemporary poetry to our classes, the question arises, "By what specific qualities shall we choose poems from this conglomerate mass to teach our children?" It may sound like a commonplace to reply, "The best," but there are those who would present the good largely through contrast with the bad. There is, no doubt, some justification for this procedure, but I believe that here, as in our study of classic literature, our time is best spent in presenting standards

by which the young student can judge for himself as regards the bad. He will have a New Poetry of his own to judge in his day, perhaps, so why burden him with less than the best of our own?

IV

As to the specific qualities, besides the great general ones already named, that we must judge by, I have chosen the following, having been largely influenced here by Professor Lowes.

First, a true poem must be made of emotion. The poet must feel deeply as well as think deeply and live deeply. Bryant puts it tersely:

Let thine own eyes o'erflow;
Let thy lips quiver with the passionate thrill;
Seize the great thought, ere yet its power be past,
And bind in words, the fleet emotion fast.

Second, let there surely be beauty and real artistry in it. Poetry is not made easily, and careless ease is quickly detected. Dare I quote Bryant again?

Deem not the framing of a deathless lay
The pastime of a drowsy summer day.

In the third place, be certain that there is an element of suggestion, for that is poetry's business as contrasted with that of prose which is to state.

Let us have, too, a virility about our poem which will banish all traces of feminism and sentimentality. We live in an age of stern reality and the bigness of things. May our American poetry reflect our inherent strength. In this connection, in all our American poetry let us have reflected the true American spirit as the individual feels it. Let us demand of American poetry that it be truly American and also let us foster and teach and encourage our native art that we may perhaps raise up an American poet among world poets.

Finally, let us always seek for the permanent under the modern and the temporary. The fundamentals of life are the same today as in the beginning. Though the coats may change, we must find the man within ever and always the same. Shakespeare's greatest quality is his universality. Shall we not demand it, then, from our poets who are to remain?

These few sign boards will, I believe, serve to guide us in our selections around the too fragmentary, the careless, the freakish contortions which appear, from time to time, out of the fog which envelops us and, looking over and beyond, we

should see emerge the best of today which becomes the treasure of tomorrow.

Let us teachers welcome this new outburst of song in America and teach our children the new Americanism of poetry and the true poetry of Americanism.

I want to quote a modern poem which seems to me to come close to my requirements. I am using it here, however, mainly because I love it for its realness and I want to pass it on.

THE ROAD TO VAGABONDIA

He was sitting on a doorstep as I went strolling by;
A lonely little beggar with a wistful, homesick eye—
And he wasn't what you'd borrow
And he wasn't what you'd steal—
But I guessed his heart was breaking,
So I whistled him to heel.

They had stoned him through the city streets and
and naught the city cared,
But I was heading outward and the roads are
sweeter shared,
So I took him for a comrade and I whistled him
away—
On the road to Vagabondia that lies across the day.

Yellow dog he was; but bless you—he was just the
chap for me!
For I'd rather have an inch of dog than miles of
pedigree.
So we stole away together on the road that has no
end
With a new-coined day to fling away and all the
stars to spend!

Oh, to walk the road at morning, when the wind is
blowing clean,
And the yellow daisies fling their gold across a world
of green—
For the wind it heals the heart-aches and the sun
it dries the scars,
On the road to Vagabondia that lies beneath the
stars.

'Twas the wonder of the going cast a spell about our
feet—
We walked because the world was young, because
the way was sweet;
And we slept in wild-rose meadows by the little
wayside farms,
'Till the Dawn came up the high road with the dead
moon in her arms.

Oh, the Dawn it went before us through a shining
 lane of skies,
 And the Dream was at our heart strings and the
 light was in our eyes,
 And we made no boast of glory and we made no
 boast of birth,
 On the road to Vagabondia that lies across the
 earth.

—Dana Burnet.

The leading article of the Reader's Guide column of The Literary Review for October 6 prints the following suggestions in answer to a correspondent seeking help in the study of the New Poetry:

The best introduction to the "new" poetry for one who has been brought up on the "old" is Marguerite Wilkinson's "New Voices." I set off the words because this book's distinction is that it points out in contemporary verse "beauty old yet ever new." The general reading public reads far less poetry than one would think from the amount written about it. Poets write about poetry, and the mass of readers keep on with the same old poems. The first service a poet can do to one of that mass is to show them that beauty is forever setting to new generations the task of recognizing her in new garments, even in new disguises. "New Voices" can be read by a complete outsider; most of our poets write for—or against—each other. For anthologies for the general reader, Louis Untermeyer's "Modern American Poetry" and "Modern British Poetry" are a good choice, with Padraic Colum's "Anthology of Irish Verse" (Boni & Live-right), and the pocket companion and friend, Jessie Rittenhouse's "Little Book of Modern Verse" (Houghton Mifflin).

Amy Lowell's "Tendencies in Modern American Poetry" (Macmillan) is indispensable. At this day I need not point out its qualities; I am at the moment concerned with its value in bridging the gulf between modern poets and their potential audiences. Louis Untermeyer's "New Era in American Poetry" has been completely re-written; appearing at the height of the controversial period, it had the polemic quality of its time. Now even the title has been changed; it will be published this fall by Holt as "American Poetry Since 1900," and from all I hear will be a work of high value for information and guidance.

For one deeply interested in the subject and, like F. M. C., willing to look at it from all points of view, there is a large and provocative collection of criticisms and appraisals. "Convention and Revolt in Poetry," by John Livingston Lowes (Houghton Mifflin, 1919)—in books about American poetry it is important to set down the date on which they appeared—"The Young Idea," opinions mainly of poets gathered by Lloyd Morris in 1917 (Duffield); "The Enjoyment of Poetry," by Max Eastman (Scribner, 1913); Mary C. Sturgeon's "Studies of Contemporary Poets" (Dodd, Mead, 1916), which is concerned with British poets; Ernest Boyd's "Ireland's Literary Renaissance" (Knopf), Lloyd Morris's "The Celtic Dawn" (Macmillan, 1917), "John Mase-

field" (Macmillan, 1922), in which W. H. Hamilton shows his devotion to his subject, and the chapters on the newer poets in John W. Cunliffe's "English Literature During the Last Half Century" (Macmillan, 1923)—a list that has certainly the virtue of variety. "The New Poetry," by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson (Macmillan, 1923), is a collection invaluable to the student; it includes poems from both sides of the Atlantic. There is to be a second volume of Charles Wharton Stork's "Contemporary Verse Anthology" (Dutton), a varied and valuable collection. The introduction to the recently published "Collected Poems" of Vachel Lindsay (Macmillan) should be pondered not only by students but by any one who has a grain of interest in the present and future of American culture.

Of the books devoted especially to organic rhythm the recently published work of Mary Austin, "The American Rhythm" (Harcourt, Brace), seems to me one of the most thoughtful and thought provoking. It is illustrated by her spiritual and illuminating transcriptions of Indian poetry. "Concerning French Verse" is an essay for English-speaking readers of French poetry, by Charles Cameron Clark (Yale University Press), that should be read by any American who finds French poetry lifeless and colorless. Many do, because they do not really hear it, as they do classic English verse. Helen Louise Cohen's "Lyric Forms From France" (Harcourt, Brace) is an anthology of translations with a scholarly introduction on the history and use of the ballade, chant-royal, villanelle, and all the rest of those tempting forms on which so many of us have at one time or another tried our hands. Amy Lowell's "Six French Poets" (Houghton Mifflin) is the finest book in English about the new forces in French poetry, and so far as I know the first one to bring home to the American reader a sense of poetry as a world movement. The poems are quoted in the original and practical English versions given in an appendix.

"An Introduction to Poetry," by Joy Hubbell and John Beatty (Macmillan), is that beginner's book for which I have been so often asked and that I feared would never be written. It has the information about metres and verse forms and the rest that more advanced books assume the reader knows all about. Bliss Perry's "Study of Poetry" (Houghton Mifflin) and John Erskine's "The Kind of Poetry" (Duffield) are catholic in their sympathies and conservative in their tendencies. Theodore Maynards' "Our Best Poets" (Holt) will greatly please all those who agree with him. I would be more likely to do so if he could keep his theological affiliation apart from his artistic judgments, but they come up like King Charles's head. A club making a programme for study will be helped by "The New Poetry," a pamphlet outline (H. W. Wilson Co.) with many book and magazine references, by the very carefully and conscientiously prepared programmes on poetry now appearing in the *Bookman*, by Amy Lowell's admirable selection of "A Book Shelf of Modern Poets," prepared for the Doubleday, Page Book Shop and issued by them in a leaflet, and by a handbook, "Our Poets of Today," by Harold Cook (Moffat, Yard), a heterogeneous but extensive collection by American verse-makers great and small, with biographical notes.

BREAD LOAF

It is a vexed question which teachers all over the country are asking themselves each spring,—Shall I take a real vacation this year and enjoy myself; or shall I study and fit myself for advancement in my profession? Middlebury College has hit upon a plan which answers the question for many of us by offering a chance for the tired teacher to rest and for the ambitious teacher to work. Those of the profession who are both tired and ambitious at the end of the school year should know about the Summer Session of the English School at Bread Loaf.

When Middlebury College decided upon a summer school of English, there was no place in the already crowded college to house it. The college had been fortunate in receiving as a bequest Bread Loaf Inn, twelve miles up in the mountains from the college proper, together with about thirty-four thousand acres of wood land, part of it being virgin forest. There are farms here and there in this vast tract, making a pleasing variety in the landscape. A campus of thirty-four thousand acres would be an impossibility for the college to manage if it were not that the Green Mountain Club has blazed trails all through these mountains. The Long Trail comes within three miles of Bread Loaf Inn, and with its several branches makes an ideal opportunity for hiking. And so the School of English was established four years ago at Bread Loaf Inn, the curious rambling old inn almost in the shadow of the mountain whose name it bears. The school of English has had to accommodate itself to the building as it was. One student wrote home that her class in vocal technique met in the music room, history of the drama in the bowling alley, and stage design in the woodshed that they were making over into a work shop, but that on sunny days any of the recitations might be held under a tree on the lawn.

Outings are always planned for the week ends. These may be strenuous two day hikes where those participating start off Saturday morning clad in knicker suits, with blankets and packs, and sleep that night in one of the mountain lodges, or they may be the easy two or three hour hikes along the easier trails. Or you may choose a morning's botany trip, or a day on the porch with a little golf or tennis by the way of exercise.

But the students of Bread Loaf do study. Many of them carry as much work as they would at the usual summer session of a college or university in the city. But they do their work much more easily because of the outings and the out-of-door life which they lead. Twelve courses were offered this summer, dramatics and creative writing being stressed. There are courses in literature, composition, appreciation, and methods. There are instructors from Middlebury, Columbia, Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Harvard, Simmons, Carleton, and Bridgewater State Normal School. One of the interested visitors this summer has been an Oxford don who has succumbed to the charms of the place to the extent of giving one of the most charming lectures of the season. With ten instructors and one hundred ten students there is a chance for each student to become well acquainted with his teacher. This is especially easy at Bread Loaf, where faculty and students are housed together and where there are no outside distractions.

The courses in the drama are unique. This department is presided over by two instructors trained in Harvard's 47 Workshop. Every Friday evening there is a play that is produced entirely by Bread Loaf talent. The scenery and costumes are made by the students. This summer the last play produced was "A Midsummer-Night's Dream," given out on the lawn with real trees and shrubs as background. One of the drawbacks in play production has been the lack of lighting by any means but kerosene lamps. Thirty or forty of these have sometimes been used at once to give the effect of sunlight streaming through a window, but an evening performance out of doors seemed impossible until the brilliant scheme of using automobile headlights was devised.

The noted guests entertained at Bread Loaf make a very interesting part of the summer's experiences. Eminent poets, novelists, editors and lecturers come to the school from time to time, either for an evening's lecture or to spend a few days with us, visiting classes and enjoying our porches and walks—really chumming with the "Loafers."

The one hundred ten students at Bread Loaf this year came from nineteen states—from Minnesota to North Carolina, and as far west as Kansas. Twenty of them had been there before; ninety were new to the charms of the place. What visitors and students are most struck with is the spirit of friendliness. It is in the air—the Vermont air perhaps where

things do not move very fast and where everyone has time to be thoughtful and friendly, and can stop to enjoy the peace and beauty of the Green Mountain country.

Lucia Granville Pittman.

THE DECEMBER MEETING

The fall meeting of the Association will be held at the Boston Public Library, Saturday morning, ten o'clock, December 8th. The general subject will be *Language and Thinking*. Among the speakers will be Dr. Alexander Inglis, Harvard University, Dr. John A. Lester, The Hill School, Pottstown, Pennsylvania, Miss Helen Stratton of Fitchburg, and Mr. Robert Frost.

Mr. Charles Swain Thomas, who will be our delegate to the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English at Detroit, will give a brief report.

Sally Freeman Dawes, President.

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